

SING, BROTHERS, SING!

The song of the folk has been fighting a losing war for some 400 years. The warning of the present-day folklorist that "you'd better hurry up and record it now because it will soon be gone" has been heard over and over again for centuries. And it has been based on a true view of the facts. The only exaggeration has been perhaps in the warners' estimate of the speed of folk song's extinction.

The war against folk song has been and is being waged by artificial song. It is a case of song dictatorship against song democracy. It is the fight of the proponents of planned singing versus those who would preserve what they deem the inalienable right of lyric freedom. It is Fewman against Everyman.

What is the difference between these two song sorts, Everyman's and Fewman's? Definitions have been made. But let's make another for each sort: Everyman's song is the living or more correctly the re-living on a sublime or spiritual level of a typical phase of Everyman's life in the familiar terms of traditional musical speech; Fewman's song is a production-line, mailorder, nationally advertised substitute for the home-made thing. It is not basically different; but it has that veneer or other surface ornament which the home-made article lacks, and it lacks the sturdiness, the lasting qualities of that which it would displace. (Please understand that I am not considering here the Great Masterpiece which Everyman never has known, never will know, and therefore never will sing.)

How can the slow but apparently sure victory of Fewman's song be explained? I wish to mention but two of the probably many factors involved. One is its showy attractiveness just mentioned. Another is that Everyman doesn't know there's a song war on. To him it is at worst a "phoney" war. The destruction of his tonal way of life is slow. It is like the slow combustion of decay as contrasted with the fast combustion of fire. So he doesn't notice it.

The setup is ideal for Fewman and his conscious objectives. Little by little, generation by generation, he has strengthened his position and lines of communication until now - with the combined aid of copyright, capital, invention, super-performance, and salesmanship - his control of the terrain is practically complete. And Everyman's song is merely vestigial. It is what the anthropologists call a "survival in culture."

So what? What is Everyman to do? What is the folklorist, Everyman's Big Brother, to do? In a recent issue of the Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin I suggested getting

back at the enemy with his own weapons; slicking up our wares and getting into the song "business" consciously. That might work. But I am not at all sure of its long-range effectiveness. I am therefore going to suggest another strategic move.

The trouble with Everyman is not so much what he sings as that he doesn't sing at all. Nature is said to abhor a vacuum. Fewman simply adores it. For a hundred years now he has observed with satisfaction the growing song-emptiness of this land and has seen in that condition his chance of providing what Everyman wants. His sweatshops in Tin Pan Alley have been ever busier.

But has he filled the void? No. He has turned out tens of thousands of songs. But he has failed largely in his attempt to get them sung. Everyman has actually taken to his heart but few of Fewman's wares. Half a dozen Stephen Foster songs and a sizable batch of Gospel hymns are about all. And now-a-days his consumption of prepared song-food has become still meagerer. He is reduced to singing or humming or whistling little tonal phrases absorbed from the repetitive jukebox or the radio, or to complete silence. His ears are surfeited. His voice is stilled.

Since Everyman does not know there's a song war on, he cannot realize the tragedy of his defeat and loss. Shakespeare saw the tragedy of such a loss. To me it seems comparable to the atrophy of the faculty of speech, laughter, or weeping - perhaps worse.

So here we come again to the folklorists among Everyman. We come to them for a bit of encouragement; for we know that they see the dark picture in historical perspective, and thus the whole picture. What can they, we, do? I ask it again. I answer it, too. First turn off the radio. Maybe selling it would be more completely effective. (The market is favorable.) Then

Sing, brothers, sing! sing, brothers, sing!
And let your voices ring, brothers, sing!

Sing preferably your own songs, brother. Live your own song life and be proud of it. Don't let the I-don't-know-a-thing-about-music inferiority complex trouble you. Don't let the radio flood of vocal contortionists beat you down. If you are mature, re-learn and re-sing the songs of your youth. If your youth was folk-tonally barren, go to the collections. If you are still young, all the better. All the easier to gain these spiritual riches without price.

But are we to remain forever old-fashioned? Decidedly NO! Every old song re-sung becomes a new one. And sing the songs with new labels, too, if you like. Better these than nothing. If the songs branded as "new" are any good, that quality is bound to be due to the folk element in them. And thus they too, with your vocal help, may come in time to enrich the store of

folk song as Foster's fine songs have. If, on the other hand and on almost every hand, they are no good, they will be self-liquidating.

So let the flood of new song flow on. You can't stop it, anyway. Patent songs and patent medicines will be with us alway. The only dyke to keep this flood from drowning us all is for you and me to sing, brothers and sisters, sing!

George Pullen Jackson

* * * * *

THE PLAY-PARTY AND SONG

Mr. B. A. Botkin in his American Play Party Song says: "The American Play Party Song is unique in the history of folk song. Song dances have existed in virtually all times and places and languages, and the fact that such songs did not come down to us is not to be taken as evidence that they did not exist, but is to be attributed to the ephemeral nature of rude improvisations which were not thought worthy of preservation."

He further says: "In spite of the universality of dance songs, there is nothing quite like the play-party to be found outside of America."

The peculiar nature of the play-party may have derived from the square dance, which is a typical offshoot of an Old World stock.

The play-party song may be little more than dance calls affixed to jingles, ballads, nursery rhymes, or other folk material - all subject to whims of location and oral transmission.

These songs are of interest both to the scholars of literature and to the folklorist. They also have a certain value for the social historian, for in spite of all their rigamarole and repetition they do have a broad background of the interests, activities, and characters of pioneer America. Their medley of nonsense, sentiment, and humor is a creation of the pioneer life with all its joys, sorrows, and hardships happily intermingled.

The play-party seems to have reached its peak more than a generation ago. It seems unfair to attribute its decline to "having seen its day," and to newer interests which call for other forms of entertainment. That may be true in part, but the building of better homes provided with hardwood floors and carpets rather than puncheon floors no doubt was largely responsible for the decline of the play-party. Truly, today

these games are as refreshing as a breath of spring, and their pretty and intricate patterns are a joy to behold, but they are better suited to the sturdy floor of a gymnasium.

The party may have been called a "frolic," a "shindig," a "hoe-down," or some other name, but it was not a social where movements were restricted to tame parlor games.

The play-party was not altogether a substitute for dancing. It satisfied a larger need. In it you had the singing, dancing, dramatic, choosing, kissing, loving, and mating elements thoroughly blended and delightfully distributed.

For the dance, music was necessary; and that music was supplied by the fiddle, which was condemned by the churches as "the instrument of the devil" - hence the dance was something for the devil's own private pleasure.

The play-party was independent of music. Nothing was necessary but a boy with a good strong voice who knew the games and songs or had a native ability for improvising. What difference did a few changed words and phrases matter, anyway? They could make a new game entirely if the occasion demanded.

Anyway, the churches were more tolerant of the play-party. The cardinal sins of the dances seemed to have been the fiddle and the waist swings. There were few, if any, records of people being "churched" for going to the play-party, but this was not true of the square dance.

Different collectors classify these games differently. Some have tried to arrange them according to subject matter. The simpler way seems to be according to their form: they naturally fall into the "singing in," or choosing games, where the ice is broken and partners are selected for the circle reel, where partners are arranged side by side in a circle, and the longway reel, where partners face each other in lines about six feet apart.

The step used in the games is left to the individual. He is free to introduce the movement that seems best to express the rhythm for him. It may be a skipping, sliding step, a running step, or something more fancy. The thing is to express the time beats correctly.

The variants which appear in the play-party song can be explained by the incorrect memorization of the words and the improvisation of them to suit the fancy, the occasion, or the locality. Locality was a large factor influencing the song words. New scenes, new situations, new occupations were reflected in their songs. These games traveled with the folk.

They may have been English or Scottish, but they have undoubtedly outgrown their beginnings. Very few, if any, of the games have the stilted forms of the English games, and the

tunes have undergone so many changes they would never be recognized.

Many of the tunes fall into the old scale forms that sound queer to those whose ears are attuned to modern music. But for those who love these old songs even the most prosaic tunes take on a strange, haunting beauty. It is almost impossible for a person trained in the technique of modern music to reproduce the effects secured unconsciously by a person who was reared on the music of the old ballads and other folk songs.

There is a quaint unsuspected humor found in the play-party games as well as many of the old ballads. Perhaps the "singing in" games are the richest in this, and strangely enough these game songs came the nearest to bringing the condemnation of the churches on their heads. One of the most wicked which was ostracized in my father's time was "Sister Phoebe." The preachers would preach sermons against this particular song; yet there seems nothing in the words, the tune, or the game to deserve such bitter criticism.

Sister Phoebe



1. Oh, sis-ter Phoe-be, how mer - ry were we,
2. Here's a rich widow. She's left all a - lone
3. Rise you up, daughter; go choose you a man,



The night we sat un - der the ju - ni - per tree,
And all of her daughters are mar - ried but one,
Go choose him the fair-est that ev - er you can.



The ju - ni - per tree: heigh ho!
All mar - ried but one heigh ho!
A - rise you up, daughter, and go!

4. Oh, Brother Simon, how merry were we
That night we lay under Job Holland's peach tree:
Job Holland's peach tree, heigh ho!

5. Job Holland ran out with his old rusty gun
And swore that he'd shoot us if we didn't run,
The way we scratched gravel, heigh ho!
6. Herc's an old soldier returned from the war,
And all of his sons are married but one
All married but one, heigh ho!
7. Rise you up, Sonny,
Go choose you a wife,
Go choose her the fairest you can for your life.
Arise you up, Sonny, and go!

"Poking fun" at the players was a popular sport in finding partners. A good example of this humor is found in "What Makes You Look So Lonesome?" After the boy or girl (as the case may be) makes the choice, the song leader or a member of the crowd starts immediately with "What a Choice You Have Made," and then, with no apparent break, the business of choosing partners goes ahead.

What Makes You Look So Lonesome?

What makes you look so lone - some,
I b'lieve you want to mar - ry;
Now choose your dear com - pan - ion;

So lone - some; so lone - some?
To mar - ry; to mar - ry;
Com - pan - ion; com - pan - ion;

What makes you look so lone - some?
I b'lieve you want to mar - ry;
Now choose your dear com - pan - ion;

I re - 'ly wish I knew!
I do, I do, I do!
One that 'll com - fort you!

What a Choice You Have Made

What a choice you have made!
In your grave you'd 'a' bet - ter been laid!

The "Poor Old Chimney Sweeper" seems to be of English or Scottish origin as far as the words are concerned.

The reference to the chimney sweeper and the mention of the broomstick marriage, of which many of us have heard since early childhood, seem good proof that the song is of many years past. The movements of this game are similar to those of other "singing in" games though there is enough difference in each one to make them enjoyed as a change.

The tune is charming.

Poor Old Chimney Sweeper

Here comes a poor old chimney sweep- er;
Now here is one of your own choos-ing;

Has but one daugh- ter and can- not keep her;
You have no time for to be los - ing;

She says she has re - solved to mar - ry;
Join your right hands; this broom step ov - er;

So choose you one and do not tar - ry.
And kiss the lips of your true lov - er.

"Five Tinkers" as played in our section was "Hog Drovers" in other localities though the actions and music were much the same. These variants reflect the influence of occupation in different sections.

The circle games may have been built upon the square dance figures. They consisted of a "right-and-left" swing, a promenade, solo dancing - all directed by the song words. "Dan Tucker" and "Shoot the Buffalo" are instances of these games.

Our longway games are doubtless derived from the Roger de Coverly dance which was brought to America by the colonists. A number of play-party games are fashioned after it. "Weevily Wheat" is our most typical example. In these games team work was necessary. If one player went wrong the whole game was "queered" for the others. Some of the patterns were rather difficult, but, when well done by accomplished players, they were really beautiful.

The play-party gave the people a chance to meet and develop socially under wholesome circumstances. It was a relief from the austere religious life. It adapted itself to the size of the group and allowed none of the dance movements which might be detrimental.

The tunes and movements may have been of European origin, but the words of the songs with their local interests and adaptations bind the games inseparably to American vigor and life.

A more intensive study of these games would reveal much of interest to musicians, historians, and folklorists.

L. L. McDowell

* * * * *

THE TENNESSEE FOLKLORE SOCIETY BULLETIN

Volume XI

Number 2

May, 1945

Published four times a year by the Tennessee Folklore Society

President

Mrs. Flora L. McDowell, Smithville

Treasurer

Mr. T. J. Farr, Cookeville

Secretary, and Editor of the Bulletin

Miss Dorothy Horne, Maryville

Membership fee and subscription to the Bulletin, one dollar a year.

CHICK-A-MA CRANEY CROW

Last fall sometime, Paul Flowers, that very good friend of the TFS, ran the following squib in his "Greenhouse" in the Memphis Commercial Appeal:

"There's a jingle running through Mrs. Julian Fulenwider's mind, and she's certain there is more of it, but what is the rest and whence comes it?

"The part she recalls is

Chaney Crow,
Went to the well to wash my toe."

Mr. Flowers then asked for help in completing the jingle. The response from his devoted public was terrific. He has been good enough to give us this file of correspondence, and from it one can reconstruct a lively children's game of half a century ago.

One lucid description comes from Mrs. Retta Thomason, Route 2, Miller Road, Atoka, Tennessee:

"Chick-a-ma Craney Crow is a child's game that I played more than sixty years ago. One child is the witch and sits on the ground, and the others join hands and march around her chanting

Chick-a-ma, Chick-a-ma, Craney Crow,
I went to the well to wash my toe.
When I got back my black-eyed chicken was gone.
What time is it, old witch?

Then the witch would say any time she pleased. Then they went round again. Finally the witch would say, "Time all chickens are dead," and she'd get up and run after them. The one she caught first would be the witch next, and the game started all over again."

A more elaborate version comes from Mrs. G. H. McMorrough, Lexington, Mississippi:

"One child, who is the witch, sits on the ground with a ring drawn around her, while the 'hen' and 'chickens' form a line. The witch draws a clock face on the ground, numbering it as she answers the following chant of the marching hen:

Chick-a-ma, chick-a-ma, craney crow,
I went to the well to wash my toe.
When I came back my black-eyed chicken was gone.
What time, old witch?

The witch answers 'one,' 'two' and so on up to twelve, numbering the clock face as she goes. When she says 'twelve,' the hen and chickens stop marching, and the witch begins to dig a hole in the ground.

Hen: What are you doing?
 Witch: Making a pot.
 Hen: What for?
 Witch: To cook a chicken.
 Hen: Where are you going to get it?
 Witch: Right there.

She runs to catch one of the chickens, all of whom try to stay behind the hen and away from the witch. When the witch catches a chicken, she puts it in a pen marked off with sticks, and the game starts again, the hen substituting 'blue-eyed' or 'brown-eyed' for 'black-eyed' according to the color of the lost chicken's eyes. The game goes on until all the chickens are caught. The first one caught is the witch next time.

"Although we were taught there were no witches, we always felt spooky and scared when the witch ran us."

Mrs. J. G. Nelson of Courtland, Mississippi, says that, when she played the game as a child, the "Chick-a-ma" verse was the first of a three-verse game, the last of which was

"How many miles to Miley Bright?
 Three score and ten.
 Can I get there by candle-light?
 Yes, if your legs are long and light,
 And the old witch don't catch you on the way."

She doesn't recall the second verse.

Still other readers had grafted the first line of the jingle on to various counting-out rhymes. The following, sent by Mrs. F. H. Pentecost of Winona, Mississippi, illustrates this type:

"Chick-a-ma, Chick-a-ma, Craney Crow,
 He's a good fisherman everybody knows,
 Catches hens, puts them in pens.
 Wild briar, limber lock
 Three geese in a flock.
 One flew east, one flew west,
 One flew over the cuckoo's nest.
 O-U-T spells out, you old dirty dish-rag, you!"

Space does not permit us to quote all the interesting variations in the text of this jingle, or to do more than comment upon the obvious interest in preserving this type of

folklore. Suffice it to say that Mr. Flowers received over forty answers to his inquiry and that this file is available to any of our readers who cares to peruse it further.

Dorothy Horne

* * * * *

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Boatright C. Mody, and Donald Day, editors. From Hell to Breakfast. Austin, Texas, The Texas Folk-Lore Society and The University Press in Dallas, 1944.

Published at the very end of 1944, From Hell to Breakfast arrived just too late to be reviewed in our last issue. Number XIX of the Texas Society's publications, the present volume bids fair to live up to the high standards both of scholarship and entertainment set by its predecessors.

An editorial note at the beginning explains the derivation of the title:

"Out in the cow country a man upon returning from a trip might say that he had traveled from hell to breakfast. Nobody could tell you in miles just how far he had been, but everybody would know that he had traveled a far piece and covered a lot of territory.

"This book contains something about hell and something about breakfast and something about a lot of things in between. If we have rambled too far, maybe the range boss, J. F. D. (J. Frank Dobie) will throw us back on the trail when he gets through rambling from hell to breakfast."

Whereupon the book sets out to make true the promise of its title. There are bits on such diverse subjects as Negro Baptizings and Mexican Customs, and about such diverse people as Carrie Dykes, Midwife, and Jim Bowie. In all there are twenty-three short articles by twenty-one authors.

At the end of these diverting proceedings, the editors have included the history of the Texas Folk-Lore Society for the year 1943, together with a list of its contributors, life members, and fellows.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Recent additions to our library of exchange publications include two more of the Anthropological Records from the University of California: A Summary of Yuki Culture, by George M. Foster; and Culture Element Distributions XXV: Reliability of Statistical Procedures and Results, by C. Douglas Chretien.

We have also received the proceedings of the American Antequarian Society at the Annual Meeting held in Worcester, Massachusetts, October 20, 1943. Besides the various business reports, the volume also contains papers on "John Crowningshield and the Building of the Privateer Diomedes" and "The First Century of New England Verse."

* * * * *

Continuing our glossary of G. I. Slang as compiled by TFS member Pvt. Joseph Nicholas, we offer the following:

1. Conscripts - brutal epithet employed by regulars in referring to selectees
2. Jelly roll - knapsack
3. Knee Knocker - tough sarge
4. Lost Soul - rookie on outpost duty
5. Nightingale - bugler who blows taps
6. Strictly cut plug - feeling fine or well pleased
7. Swacked - plastered
8. Serum - liquor
9. Slipping the clutch - talking or criticizing too much
10. Sugar report - letter from the girl friend.

* * * * *

And did you hear the flower sellers in the Knoxville market offering "johnnykills" those first fine spring days?